

THE ZEN ROOM

The Capitol's little-known, taxpayer-funded wellness hangout is a quiet space for lawmakers to meditate and practice mindfulness

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+ BRAD BUMSTED

A legislator's job can be stressful, no question. So stressful, in fact, that the Senate used taxpayer money to install a yoga and meditation room, The Caucus has learned.

The chamber spent more than \$5,100 creating the room in the basement of the Capitol building since February 2017, records provided by the Senate Chief Clerk's office show.

Among the features?

Meditation cushions filled with organic buckwheat, which cost \$896.

Plants. Lots of plants. It cost more than \$900 just to "service" those plants. An \$83 grow light for those plants.

A large painting, "Summer on the Lake," costing \$676.

A water garden fountain, costing \$379.

And, lest you have a meditation room without the requisite soothing sounds of songbirds and crickets and Tibetan singing bowls, more than \$500 in stereo equipment and compact discs.

Sounds relaxing, no?

Sorry, it's off-limits to the folks who paid for all this stuff, the public.

It's open only to legislators and Senate and House employees, according to a Senate spokeswoman, "due to insurance concerns."

The room's existence came as a surprise to some members and senior staffers.

"It's not been made available to us," House Chief Clerk David Reddecliff said.

Rep. Dan Moul, chairman of the Taxpayers' Caucus, said: "I've never been in their cafeteria, much less their yoga room. I didn't even know they had it (yoga room)."

A Senate employee told The Caucus use of the yoga room is by "word of mouth." Another Senate staffer said it's "only for certain people;" the staffer used air quotes around the phrase "certain people."

"You got to be up here," she said, raising an arm to indicate high rank in the Senate. An employee must then get special access added to his or her Capitol entrance ID, sources said.

PROMOTING 'HEALTHIER LIFESTYLES'

The Senate defends the yoga room and the use of taxpayer money.

"Several years ago, the Senate health care claims were determined to be higher in the areas of stress and mental health along with other consequential illness," Senate Republican spokeswoman Jennifer Kocher said in a written statement.



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The Senate yoga and meditation room includes a water garden fountain, left, cushions filled with organic buckwheat, stereo equipment and many plants. However, all of the plants but one have been killed by spider mites. The cost for creating the restricted-access basement room: \$5,100.

Caucus. The Senate spent \$30,000 for drapes for the four offices and more than \$13,600 on a kitchen.

"For my office, I have used hand-me-downs from home and second-hand stores," Phillips-Hill said.

Over in the House, there's an empty room in the Irvis Office Building set aside as a "meditation room."

"We have not spent a nickel on it," Reddecliff said.

There are no mats, meditation CDs or wall art. A few chairs were moved into the room, which has a ceiling leak. "To our knowledge, no one has taken yoga mats over. It's a temporary thing," Reddecliff said, noting it could be designated for office space.

SPARE CHANGE IN A \$27.2 MILLION SURPLUS

Citizen activist Gene Stilp, a long-time critic of legislative spending, was incredulous when he learned taxpayers paid to outfit the yoga room. "This is the height of absurdity," he said. "I can't believe this. I just can't believe it. No words can express my amazement. They've outdone themselves this time."

Stilp's pink pig, known as "Pignelope," became the symbol of protests in 2005 after lawmakers awarded themselves a middle-of-the-night pay raise. Look for him to break out the prop soon based on this story.

"It's not a lot of money, but what they're using it for is outrageous," Stilp said. "The pig is going to do an investigation."

It's not clear who, exactly, uses the yoga room.

The Senate Chief Clerk's Office, which handles public records requests for the chamber, denied this newspaper's request for access to a list of

employees and legislators signing into use the yoga room as well as a class list of participants for private yoga lessons.

The office said no such legislative records existed. It also denied a request for advertising material or brochures notifying legislative employees and legislators of the availability of the yoga room.

Kate Flessner, a spokeswoman for Senate President Pro Tempore Joseph Scarnati, provided a survey of employees that indicated the Senate was considering a "wellness" program. It didn't specifically mention yoga or meditation; it did ask about things such as strength training, stretching and flexibility training.

"We did what our employees thought they would use," Flessner said.

Asked if it was a valid expenditure of tax dollars, Moul, R-Adams County, said "I don't think so."

(Moul also told The Caucus he does not own yoga pants. "I don't think I would look good in them," he said, laughing.)

"I would never vote for it," Moul said. These types of expenditures, though, are not specific line items subject to a public vote by the House or Senate.

An audit released last week for the 2017-18 fiscal year showed the Senate held a reserve of \$27.2 million as of June 30. That is part of a \$137.8 million legislative surplus, according to the audit.

As of last week, The Caucus was still awaiting any email or memo to all employees inviting them to the yoga room.

Meantime, the \$900 spent by the Senate on plant care in the yoga room hasn't quite paid off. All that plant "evaluation," Miracle-Gro, plant lights and water?

Only one plant has survived.

The rest died from spider mites, Kocher said. ☹